This study examines the diachronic evolution of the intensifiers *muíto* ‘very’ and *bem* ‘well’ in Portuguese, illustrated in examples (1) and (2). Previous research on intensifiers have paid particular attention to the affecting factors and distribution of canonical forms of intensification, such as *really*, *so* and *very*, in English, and *muy/mucho* and *bien*, in some varieties of Spanish (Arjona 1990, Serradilla Castaño 2006, Brown and Cortés Torres 2013, Kanwit et al. 2017, Ito and Tagliamonte 2003, and Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). Commonly described as a newer intensifier in Spanish in comparison with *muy/mucho* (Kanwit et al. (2017)), we show that Portuguese *bem* is established as an intensifier as early as the 15th century, also attested in Latin in the form *bene* (Napoli (2014):252). Furthermore, *bem* shows association with adjectives of negative evaluation (e.g., *triste* ‘sad’) across all the centuries covered by our study.

The data were collected from the Tycho Brahe Parsed Corpus of Historical Portuguese (Galves et al. 2017), an electronic corpus of written Portuguese with texts that range from 1380 to 1881 (3,000,000 words). We targeted two specific collocations for this study, *muíto* + ADJ(ective) and *bem* + ADJ, in order to track the changes over time of these two lexical items by observing the adjectives with which they are associated (Stefanowitsh 2019). Table 1 below provides the (normalized) frequencies for this part of the analysis. In terms of overall results, we observed an increase, albeit slight ($\chi^2 = 5.5135, p < .01887$), in the percentage of *bem*+ADJ vis-à-vis *muíto*+ADJ, from 11.5% in the 15/16 centuries to 17% in the 19th century.

Of the 1911 tokens that comprise the data set, we observed 900 unique adjectives, which corresponds to 47.1% of the adjective forms. There are two notable patterns attested in the data regarding the distribution of adjectives. First, the *muíto* tokens represent the largest portion of the high-frequency adjective (e.g., *grande* ‘large’ and *diferente* ‘different’), not suprising given the general preference for *muíto* over *bem*. However, we maintain, following a suggestion by Baayen (2009), that low-frequency, one-off (a.k.a. *hapax legomena*) tokens should be viewed as a locus for language change, providing evidence of analogical extension of the intensifier+ADJ structure established by *muíto*+ADJ. Our results indeed demonstrate a preponderance of these hapax forms (e.g., *mediño* ‘awful’ and *patentes* ‘overt’) are disproportionately represented with *bem*.

The results of this study demonstrate that *muíto* and *bem* are both long-standing (at least since the 15th century) intensifiers in Portuguese, with overall frequency being the feature that most differentiates the distribution of these two forms. Not only is *bem* as an intensifier less frequent than *muíto* over time, but it also collocates with lower frequency adjectives throughout the data set. Finally, we show that these forms are unbounded (Paradis 2001, Paradis 2008), contrasting with the morphological absolute superlative *-íssimo/-íssima*, as in *perigosíssimo* ‘(very) dangerous’. The distribution of *muíto/bem*+ADJ with respect to these superlative forms is further explored in our data.
Examples

(1) e sei certo, que a graça do meu Rei de Portugal está comigo, e me tem posto em **muito grandes** esperanças. (17th)

‘And I know for certain that the gratitude of my Portuguese King is with me and he has been giving me great hope.’

(2) e os fizeram voltar de todo para as estáncias, ficando no campo desta feita estirados João de Affonseca, e Francisco Velho, dous Cavaleiros principaes, que este dia fizeram **bem grandes** cousas. (17th)

‘and made them come back to their place, staying only João de Affonseca, e Francisco Velho, two of the main knights that conquered very great things’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century</th>
<th>15/16</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
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</thead>
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<td>muito</td>
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<td>252.8</td>
<td>579.9</td>
<td>154.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>47.3</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1: Normalized frequencies of **muito** and **bem** (per million words)

References


